Indiana State Department of Health

Asbestos

Asbestos is the name applied to a group of different minerals that occur naturally in the environment. These minerals are made up of long, thin fibers that appear somewhat similar to fiberglass. Asbestos fibers are very strong and are resistant to heat and chemicals. Because of these properties, asbestos fibers have been used in a wide range of products, mostly in building materials, friction products, and heat-resistant fabrics.

What happens to asbestos when it enters the environment?

Because the fibers are resistant to chemicals, they are also very stable in the environment. Asbestos fibers do not evaporate into air or dissolve in water, and they are not broken down over time.

How might I be exposed to asbestos?

Ways you may be exposed to asbestos include:

- Inhaling tiny asbestos fibers suspended in air;
- Inhaling degraded asbestos containing products that have broken down (e.g. insulation, ceiling and floor tiles, roof shingles, cement, automobile brakes and clutches);
- Being in or having close proximity to a mine or factory containing asbestos;
- Being near a building being torn down or renovated that contains asbestos fibers; or
- Close proximity to a waste site that is not properly covered up or stored to protect it from wind erosion.

How can asbestos affect my health?

Individuals who are exposed to asbestos from working in factories, shipyards, mining operations, and other industries have greater risks for breathing high levels of asbestos fibers then others. This can lead to increased risk of:

- lung cancer;
- mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the chest and the abdominal cavity; and
- asbestosis, a condition in which the lungs become scarred with fibrous tissue.

Is there a medical test to determine whether I have been exposed?

The most common test used to determine if you have been exposed to asbestos is a chest x-ray. Asbestos disease usually occurs long after initial exposure from 20 to 50 years after. An X-ray cannot detect the asbestos fibers themselves, so it will not be helpful in determining if you were recently exposed to asbestos. However, if exposure occurred 20 or more years ago, it can detect early signs of lung disease caused by asbestos.

What safeguards are in place to protect human health?

In the late 1990's, the United State Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) eliminated new uses of asbestos in insulation, brakes, floor and ceiling tiles, cement, paper, and all other processes associated with asbestos. Additionally, several state and federal regulations now exist that: require school systems to investigate whether asbestos exposure is a problem inside school buildings, and if so, to reduce or eliminate the exposure; control release of asbestos from factories and during building demolition or renovation to prevent asbestos from getting into the environment; require disposal of waste asbestos materials or products in only approved locations; establish standard limits of fibers that may be present in drinking water; and regulate the concentration of asbestos allowed in air in the workplace**.**

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Additional National Resources:

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):
www.epa.gov/asbestos/pubs/ashome.html

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR):
www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/tf.asp?id=29&tid=4

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)
www.osha.gov/workers.html

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